



“Pleasure and Pain in Exquisite Extremes”: Sexual/Textual S/M in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*

Kara M. Manning

This essay experiments with scripting erotic fantasy and reading sadomasochistic role play in Emily Brontë’s sole novel, Wuthering Heights. Where previous scholarship has addressed sadomasochism in the text from the vantage point of psychoanalytic theory, I ground my reading in recent sociological studies of BDSM acts and linguistic practices. Brontë’s narrative, I argue, is a layered series of textual interactions that register as sexual encounters, and these moments of textual intercourse/sexual discourse might be read as S/M scenes. I suggest that readers—both Brontë’s and my own—be invited to take up roles and play out scenes of perverse fantasy.

The sexually exciting effect of many emotions which are in themselves unpleasurable, such as feelings of apprehension, fright or horror, persists in a great number of people throughout their adult life. There is no doubt that this is the explanation of why so many people seek opportunities for sensations of this kind, subject to the proviso that the seriousness of the unpleasurable feeling is damped down by certain qualifying facts, such as its occurring in an imaginary world, in a book or in a play. If we assume that a similar erotogenic effect attaches even to intensely painful feelings, especially when the pain is toned down or kept at a distance by some accompanying condition, we should here have one of the main roots of the masochistic-sadistic instinct, into whose numerous complexities we are very gradually gaining some insight. —Sigmund Freud (1905)¹

Nineteenth-century “bourgeois” society—and it is doubtless still with us—was a society of blatant and fragmented perversion. And this was not by way of hypocrisy, for nothing was more manifest and more prolix, or more manifestly taken over by discourses and institutions.... Modern society is perverse, not in spite of its puritanism or as if from a backlash provoked by its hypocrisy; it is in actual fact, and directly, perverse. —Michel Foucault (1976)²

So what is SM? It is sometimes easier to say what it is not. It does not entail violence and it is not nonconsensual. That does not mean that an SM practitioner cannot commit a violent or nonconsensual act but that such acts are not part of SM. — Charles Moser and Peggy J. Kleinplatz (2006)³

I begin with what might seem an excessive, even unorthodox, use of epigraphs in order to lay immediate emphasis on the act of reading, acts of sadomasochism (S/M), and these activities as interrelated. Reading is a perverse pastime, one in which we form consensual relationships with authors and with characters, and during which we welcome feelings of both pleasure and pain. As scholars, we delight in rending texts, in being let into the secrets they unfold when we bind ourselves to them and lovingly abuse them, rendering them submissive. We experience great pleasure when



we bend a text, seemingly to our will, when it readily enacts a scenario of our own design and can be whipped and molded, dressed and fragmented, to suit our desires and participate in our academic and social interests. We enter and decompose textual bodies in order to compose our own work. I have, for instance, perversely severed my epigraphs from the three original texts to serve as a historicizing framework for the discussion to follow. But, always consenting, the original texts seem to happily comply. Books, perhaps, make the best partners in S/M relationships. And some books tell stories about—and actively invite us into—such relationships. I want to suggest that Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is an exemplary narrative in this regard, bursting with perversity and enticing us to merge with it. The novel presents us with several functional S/M relationships that, I argue, are marked by consensuality and discursive exchange and which privilege and empower female sexuality and textuality.

Gag Reflex: Contextualizing S/M in *Wuthering Heights*

Readers have felt the sting of Brontë's whip since the initial publication of *Wuthering Heights* in 1847, though some with less (acknowledged) pleasure than others. Unsurprisingly, and in nineteenth-century fashion, a number of Brontë's contemporaries remarked quite negatively upon the work. An unsigned review from the July 1848 issue of the Philadelphia-based *Graham's Lady's Magazine*, for example, offers a scathing treatment:

There is an old saying that those who eat toasted cheese at night will dream of Lucifer. The author of *Wuthering Heights* has evidently eaten toasted cheese. How a human being could have attempted such a book as the present without committing suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters, is a mystery. It is a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors, such as we might suppose a person, inspired by a mixture of brandy and gunpowder, might write for the edification of fifth-rate blackguards. (qtd. in Johnson 435-436)

Supposing the novel, which was originally published under the pseudonym Ellis Bell, to have been written by a deranged man, this reviewer seems keen to protect female readers from its "vulgar depravity" and "unnatural horrors." Another critic, publishing a review in *The Examiner*, a weekly British periodical, called *Wuthering Heights* "a strange book....[W]ild, confused, disjointed, and improbable"; its characters are uneducated, rude "savages" who represent "coarse and loathsome" qualities that are unfit for polite public consumption (qtd. in Johnson 435). Clearly, Brontë's only novel presented readers on both sides of the Atlantic with an uncomfortable combination of sensations, though it seems likely that many who wrote or spoke of it disparagingly did so in an (un/conscious) effort to preserve the status quo and uphold patriarchal normativity and its colonizing effects. It would not have been acceptable to discuss Brontë's text, rife with subversive linguistic, physical, emotional, and sexual tensions and traumas, in an overtly and wholly positive manner. Even Charlotte Brontë, in her Preface to the 1850 edition of the novel, tempered praise of her then-dead sister with admonitions against the less savoury elements of the work and its characters.



Charlotte acknowledges "some glimpses of grace and gaiety [in] the younger Catherine" and "a certain strange beauty in [the] fierceness" of the elder Catherine, who also possesses "honesty in the midst of perverted passion and passionate perversity," but also suggests it is not "right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff" (Brontë liii). Such comments did little to condone a nineteenth-century view of Emily Brontë as a matured writer or to embrace the powerfully assertive—and insertive—positions occupied by women in the text. Indeed, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, known for his unconventional, libertine attitudes toward female sexuality, admired the novel's "power and sound style," but nevertheless described it in an 1854 letter to his friend William Allingham as "a fiend of a book—an incredible monster, combining all the stronger female tendencies from Mrs. Browning to Mrs. Brownrigg" (Rossetti 58).⁴ At this point, Emily's identity as the novel's author was widely known; the strong passions of both Brontë and her female characters made for hellish, demonic reading.

Critics then and now have tended to emphasize the power, passion, and perversity of *Wuthering Heights*, with varying degrees of personal disgust and/or social disapproval. As "perversity" and other variations of the word have taken on less negative connotations (at least academically), discussions of the novel have more positively and productively accounted for the violence and sexual tensions at play in the narrative. I am certainly not the first reader to discover sadomasochistic elements in Brontë's novel, and this essay joins a number of other literary studies that attempt to delineate the sadism and/or masochism evident in the text. Carol Siegel, for example, has agreed "with the general view that *Wuthering Heights* is the canonical Victorian novel most explicitly concerned with the representation of sadism and masochism," but she asserts that "as such, it is also extraordinarily concerned with their containment" (7). In a now-dated essay on "Infanticide and Sadism in *Wuthering Heights*," Wade Thompson claims that an "extraordinary sadism...underlies Emily Brontë's [sic] concept of emotional relationships" (69) and, in tracing the ways in which this sadism leaks into the novel, Thompson comes to a very different conclusion from Siegel: "Life is pain, hate, and perversity. It is a tribute to Emily Brontë's [sic] uncanny poetic powers that she has deceived generations of readers into believing that they were reading a beautiful, romantic, and indeed glorious love story" (74). Similarly, Susan Jaret McKinstry explores the power of desire in the text, ultimately arguing that

The novel does not celebrate the containment of desire but, rather, its power... Desire turns lovers into mimetic demons, it transforms houses into prisons, and it translates romantic conventions into children's fairytales. But in the process of fulfilling desires, the fairytale becomes a nightmare. *Wuthering Heights* is a chaotic novel in which the rules of social life are never fully in force. Instead, wishes come true—violently, and with vengeance. (145)

While McKinstry does not deal explicitly with sadism, masochism, or sadomasochism, she does tread closely to notions of such relationships when she points out that "*Wuthering Heights* portrays a world of dangerously powerful children, where fantasy and desire overcome the adult laws of reality and order" (141-2). In other words, the



violent fantasies enacted by characters when they are young transgress the boundaries established by the social "order" and, as I intend to show, strongly resemble S/M role play.

The taking on and playing of roles in response to desire is also commented on by Steven Vine, who claims that "Cathy and Heathcliff enact a drama of desire and identification in which their separate selves wuther [tremble; quake] into the other, but also where the 'frame' of the self is shaken from within and where its coherency is scripted and erased" (349-50). Again, Vine does not discuss the novel in terms of S/M, but his focus on identity and subjectivity implicitly contributes to scholarly conversations that deal with sadomasochistic relationships, particularly between the elder Catherine and Heathcliff. In "'To Save the Life of the Novel': Sadomasochism and Representation in *Wuthering Heights*," an essay to which my examination is most indebted, Robin DeRosa frames her reading within the context of psychoanalysis and suggests that "Emily Brontë, writing well before Freud and Lacan, seems to address the theoretical issues involved in S/M and its relationship both to the death drive and to representation" (28). DeRosa then convincingly illustrates how characters' roles as either sadist or masochist shift depending on their use of language or proximity to texts.⁵ For DeRosa, control over language or text is often a sign of sadism, an engagement with the symbolic order of signification that creates and maintains life, while silence or distance from texts is indicative of the masochistic death drive. Perhaps most recently, Claire Jarvis devotes a dissertation chapter to exploring a similar conceptualization of S/M as a social dichotomy, but rather than language, the institution of marriage is marked by sadism. Taking an approach grounded in the Deleuzian theory of masochistic contract as separate from sadistic law, Jarvis asserts that "Brontë connects sadistic sexuality to reproduction and, in doing so, connects the institutionality of marriage to sadism. In contrast, the masochism displayed in Catherine's relationship to Heathcliff is non-marital, non-genital, non-reproductive, and, unconventionally, thus valued above the sadistic satellite relationships" (55). Unlike many previous scholars, Jarvis makes a distinction between the kinds of violence that occur in the text, pointing to active gestures (slaps, beatings) as aligned with the sadistic legality of marriage and to inactive or "frozen" moments (hanging of dogs, gripping of wrists) as reflective of the masochistic contract made outside the bonds of wedlock.

Scholars have ultimately been concerned about the degree to which perversion, sadism, masochism, or sadomasochism are domesticated, institutionalized, marginalized, or otherwise contained by Brontë's narrative. Compelling as they are, these arguments have been restricted by focusing almost exclusively on the relationship between the elder Catherine and Heathcliff and by relying largely on the theories of Freud, Lacan, and/or Deleuze. Approaching the novel from the theoretical perspective of psychoanalysis is limiting, I think, in that it ignores the complex physical and mental practices comprising S/M play, as well as the ways in which readers participate in the S/M scene(s) "scripted" by Brontë. This "scripting," which links the consensual practices of S/M with the composition of texts and the performance of roles, is the crucial point that other investigations have failed



to adequately address. I thus complicate and expand on previous scholarship by grounding my reading of *Wuthering Heights* in recent sociological and ethnographic studies of practitioners of S/M. Additionally, I move beyond the central pairing of Catherine and Heathcliff, examining the novel's other relationships in terms of S/M play. I contend that Brontë is not only "address[ing] the theoretical issues involved in S/M," but that she is also exploring the pragmatic actualities of S/M play (DeRosa 28). Moreover, I assert that the practical S/M relationships in the novel encourage readers to conflate sexuality and textuality in ways that relegate discursive power and sexual autonomy to female characters and to Brontë herself. As I hope to demonstrate, the most successful S/M relationships depicted in *Wuthering Heights* are those between Cathy Linton and Hareton Earnshaw and Nelly Dean and Lockwood. The S/M games readers play with Emily Brontë, via the narrator Lockwood, are also powerfully perverse—and, like Thompson, "I use the word without its usual pejorative connotations" (69). The perversely S/M nature of reading—of being overpowered, bound, and penetrated by words as we consensually engage in scenes of textual intercourse—makes the act painfully pleasurable.

Whip Lash: S/M in Practice

Taking pleasure in pain is inherent to S/M acts. All parties experience pain and pleasure: for the sadist, pleasure is derived from inflicting the pain, while the masochist finds pleasure in receiving the pain. A stereotypical (often negative) view of this give-take dyad is sometimes (still) accepted without question as a result of the work first of Krafft-Ebing, then of Freud, who succinctly notes that "[t]he most common and the most significant of all the perversions—the desire to inflict pain upon the sexual object, and its reverse—received from Krafft-Ebing the names of 'sadism' and 'masochism' for its active and passive forms respectively" (23). But as the epigraphs to this essay suggest, the medical and theoretical constructions of S/M as pathologically and categorically identifiable perversions (read: harmful and socially unacceptable corruptions or distortions) of mind and body have begun to give way to studies of S/M as a diverse set of viable and healthy practices that allow consensual participants to engage in erotic role play and fantasy in safe, nonviolent ways. For the purposes of this essay, in which I am positing that Brontë is exploring and encouraging the practice of consensual S/M relationships in *Wuthering Heights*, it will therefore be useful to situate myself among several studies of practitioners of S/M.

Since the 1980s, a number of researchers have taken pains to observe the behaviours and to represent the views of S/M practitioners as objectively and as accurately as possible. Attempting to define S/M without disparaging it, for example, Charles Moser and Eugene E. Levitt note "the term sadomasochism (S/M) is usually construed to refer to an association between sexual arousal and physical and/or psychological pain," and they continue by delineating the physical and psychological manifestations of pain: "The physical pain is caused by behaviours which range from pinches, slaps, and bites to behaviours that may produce lesions or draw blood. The psychological pain encompasses feelings of helplessness, subservience, humiliation,



and degradation...[and] is brought about by verbal abuse, bondage, and 'being forced' to do various acts" (322-3). The notion of finding any sexual satisfaction in either physical or psychological pain has long been received with disgust by those who do not partake in S/M themselves, and a general lack of understanding leads to assumptions that S/M activities —whether verbal, physical, or both—are sick, cruel, and violent. Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Charles Moser have attempted to disrupt this line of thinking. They claim, for instance, that "[t]raditional conceptions of sadomasochism are misleading. This is because they are not based on close examination of what the majority of SM participants actually do and how they interpret their own behaviours...We found that sadomasochism [is] constituted by five social features: dominance and submission, role playing, consensuality, a sexual context, and mutual definition" (379). These features suggest that S/M can be a safe and healthy means of exploring sexual fantasies and any "violence" or "abuse" that may occur during the scene is agreed upon, expected, and thoroughly enjoyed by all participants. Similarly, as Eileen L. Zurbriggen and Megan R. Yost explain, "sadomasochistic activities, which require the consent of the partner, are generally scripted or well-planned out scenarios, and possibly involve role-play, particular fetish clothing, or additional paraphernalia (e.g. rope, handcuffs, paddles)" (300). From the perspective of its practitioners, S/M comprises a wide array of acts that are certainly not considered gratuitously violent or cruel but are, on the contrary, extremely imaginative and intimate. Most importantly, engaging in an S/M relationship requires mutual consent and an enormous degree of trust.

The issue of consent in S/M has been considered quite recently, in terms of practitioners' views of mutual definition and in relation to literary representations of consensual non-consent. In a 2013 meta-analysis titled "Consent vs. Coercion: BDSM Interactions Highlight a Fine but Immutable Line," Dulcinea Pitagora offers a comprehensive review of the extant literature related to BDSM-oriented sexual subcultures and notes that consensuality is always present as "the factor that distinguishes non-pathological BDSM sexual interaction from pathological acts of violence" (28). In addressing the potentially hazy boundaries between consent and coercion, Pitagora stresses that BDSM activity is often predicated on an acknowledgement that participants will toe that blurred line as part of the play:

[A]s can happen during any type of communication between individuals, agreed upon meaning between BDSM participants can be tenuous despite the presumption of a common understanding. It is generally understood among BDSM practitioners that a successful scene will include the testing of limits (i.e., the intentional pressing of agreed upon parameters), which approaches boundaries but stops short of trespassing them. (32)

That is, the recognition of consent as a slippery concept is a factor in establishing permitted limits and is an element in building eroticized fantasy. The selection of a mutually agreed upon safeword allows participants the opportunity to end play or withdraw consent without relying on utterances typically associated with displeasure or unwillingness ("no," "stop," etc.) but that, in the context of an S/M scene, are



dialogic features of the fantasy. Indeed, some S/M practitioners are interested in scripting nonconsensual fantasies, such as scenes of rape play, in which consent is obscured almost completely yet, as Pitagora points out, is ever present as "an invisible scaffolding" (32). Angelika Tsaros reads how characters negotiate similar consensual non-consenting relationships as represented in the novels *Story of O* (1954) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), ultimately arguing that the texts present two versions of female submission, the first of which reflects a kind of female autonomy in the erasure of O's subjectivity, and the second of which performs a simultaneous mainstreaming and rejection of S/M interactions, as the female protagonist of *Fifty Shades* "never even begins to explore her subjectivity and instead replaces her own wishes with her lover's...The narrative thereby reinforces the harmful boundaries between what desires are presently accepted as mainstream, and the ones that continue to be pathologized, cast out, and ridiculed" (875). Written more than a century before either of these texts, *Wuthering Heights* presents versions not of female submission, but of dominance, and I suggest that Brontë, as one of the dominant female players, unsettles boundaries between the un/acceptable and the sexual/textual.

Safe Words: Scripting S/M Scenes in *Wuthering Heights*

Although it may disturb some readers—specifically those who do not wish to recognize or define their engagement with the novel as S/M—*Wuthering Heights* offers the opportunity both to role play and to observe others playing—and learning to play—at roles. By immersing ourselves in the text, we "ask" Brontë to tell us a story that will affect us, stimulate and excite us; our continued reading constitutes a form of consent (one might, at any moment, employ a silent "safeword," close the book, and choose to sever the relationship indefinitely). This request and consensual engagement parallels the relationship between the novel's frame narrator, Lockwood, and the housekeeper, Nelly Dean.⁶ In asking Nelly to relate the past and present goings on at *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood engages in a textual exchange that is remarkably similar to our own. Just as readers (more or less) passively consume Brontë's actively authorial words, so too does Lockwood give himself up to Nelly's discourse, a discourse over which Nelly, having presumably witnessed the events she describes, is absolute mistress. Significantly, Lockwood perceives—and preserves—Nelly's words in overtly sexual terms:

...I desired Mrs Dean, when she brought in supper, to sit down while I ate it, hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip, and either rouse me to animation, or lull me to sleep by her talk.

"You have lived here a considerable time," I commenced; "did you not say sixteen years?"

"Eighteen, sir; I came, when the mistress was married, to wait on her; after she died, the master retained me for his housekeeper."

"Indeed."

There ensued a pause. She was not a gossip, I feared, unless about her own affairs, and those could hardly interest me.

However, having studied for an interval, with a fist on either knee, and a cloud of meditation over her ruddy countenance, she ejaculated –

“Ah, times are greatly changed since then!” (Brontë 33)

Lockwood “desires” Nelly to “rouse” him; he hopes to be mentally and physically titillated by her words (and if not roused, then put to sleep: a common aftereffect of sexual release). In explaining how she “came” to the estate, Nelly’s face takes on a “ruddy” hue, a detail in which may be discerned the flush of erotic excitement.⁷ The statement that she “ejaculated” (with an initial, exclamatory “ah”) serves as both a momentary climax and a consensual “contract” with which her sexual/textual relationship with Lockwood is established. Importantly, with this ejaculation, Nelly suddenly takes on an active and penetrative role: she becomes the discursive mistress over Lockwood who is, in fact, consuming (taking *in*) his supper even as he is penetrated by her words. Lockwood clearly has an appetite for intercourse and, for the moment, he becomes the passive, receptive vessel into which Nelly deposits her discursive load.

My reading of this scene seeks to illustrate Brontë’s use of dialogue as an eroticized scripting of S/M roles, as well as to emphasize the ways in which the English language inextricably links bodies and books (or other forms of linguistic exchange). Sexual (bodies) and textual (books) knowledge might be conflated; the carnal and the mental, intercourse and discourse can/could signify the same thing. *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, for instance, that “sexual” was (and is) used adjectivally to mean “relating to, tending towards, or involving sexual intercourse, or other forms of intimate physical contact.”⁸ The explicit connection here between physical and/or carnal knowledge and its exchange was also contained within one of the definitions of “intercourse” as a “sexual connexion,” but “intercourse” was also used prominently during the nineteenth century to mean “social communication between individuals; frequent and habitual contact in conversation and action.”⁹ Intercourse signifies both sex and talk, sexuality and textuality. Within a web of meanings, sexual intercourse and textual discourse become merged; the definitional boundaries between the acts implied by each phrase can blur and may well overlap. The exchange of words is, thus, not a far cry from the exchange of genitalia or of bodily fluids. Judith Still and Michael Worton describe the composition and subsequent reception of both textuality and sexuality as continuous, fluid processes, which are often symbiotic (4-7). Brontë encourages a similar association between the act of reading text and the act of having sex. Via Lockwood, readers are entangled in textual intercourse/sexual discourse, immersed in a kind of (cunni)lingual play—here I pun on the sexualization of Nelly’s oral account—that resembles S/M.

As Nelly relates the histories of the inhabitants of *Wuthering Heights* to Lockwood, readers discover that much of Catherine Earnshaw’s and Heathcliff’s childhoods were spent learning to play S/M roles. DeRosa points out that Catherine displays sadistic

tendencies when she requests that her father bring her "a whip" from Liverpool when "she was hardly six years old" (Brontë 36). Mr. Earnshaw returns with neither Hindley's fiddle, nor Catherine's whip, having brought Heathcliff home instead. After a time, Catherine develops a strong affinity for the "dirty, ragged, black-haired child" (36), and Nelly's description of their childhood relationship is conveyed to Lockwood in extraordinarily S/M terms:

She was much too fond of Heathcliff. The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him: yet, she got chided more than any of us on his account.

In play, she liked, exceedingly, to act the little mistress; using her hands freely, and commanding her companions: she did so to me, but I would not bear slapping, and ordering; and so I let her know. (42)

In her youth, Catherine takes great pleasure in S/M role play, and the part she enjoys performing the most is that of "the little mistress." Her dominant behaviour can be characterized as S/M only when "her companions," including Heathcliff, agree to participate in her "play" as masochistic submissives, however. Because Nelly "would not bear" to take on such a role, she is not an active participant in the children's S/M but is, instead, a voyeuristic observer who visually consumes the scene (and takes pleasure in relating it to Lockwood years later). Throughout their early years, Catherine and Heathcliff "were constant companions" precisely because each knew which role to perform in their S/M games (68). Nelly claims, "the boy would do *her* [Catherine's] bidding in anything," and "he yielded completely" to Catherine's dominance in play and superiority in education (43, 68). In essence, Heathcliff masochistically complements Catherine's sadistic role as "mistress" by admirably performing as her "slave."

The mutually understood S/M relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is disrupted in later years. Catherine's increasingly intimate relationship with Edgar Linton creates the rupture, as Edgar effectively replaces Heathcliff as her submissive. Nelly describes the events leading to this shift, telling Lockwood about an incident that occurred while she attempted to chaperone a meeting between Catherine and Edgar. Having ordered Nelly to leave the room with no result, Catherine first pinches and strikes the housekeeper in Edgar's presence, then she becomes wild with rage, shaking her little nephew and, finally, boxing Edgar's ear: "she seized [Hareton's] shoulders, and shook him till the poor child waxed livid, and Edgar thoughtlessly laid hold of her hands to deliver him. In an instant one was wrung free, and the astonished young man felt it applied over his own ear in a way that could not be mistaken for jest" (71-72). Many scholars point to the violence in this scene as exemplary of S/M, but these acts clearly lack the necessary element of consent. Furthermore, this is not play; rather, Catherine commits cruel acts of abuse in an effort to victimize others. It is not until Edgar agrees to engage in such activities with Catherine that one might consider their relationship S/M. Though appalled by Catherine's outburst initially, Edgar seems quick to discover his acumen as a submissive, for Nelly asserts that



"the quarrel had merely effected a closer intimacy—had broken the outworks of youthful timidity, and enabled them to forsake the disguise of friendship, and confess themselves lovers" (73). Later that day, Catherine reveals Edgar had proposed to her, and Nelly chides the girl's actions and voices her opinion regarding Edgar's response to those actions: "To be sure, considering the exhibition you performed in his presence this afternoon, I might say it would be wise to refuse him—since he asked you after that, he must either be hopelessly stupid, or a venturesome fool" (78). Edgar's desire to wed Catherine even after she slaps him indicates that he is, indeed, "venturesome," in that he will play the masochistic role in their marriage, ensuring that Catherine will maintain her preferred role as sadist. Catherine tells Nelly that she cannot choose Heathcliff because "[i]t would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now; so he shall never know how I love him" (81). On the surface, Catherine is discussing socioeconomics here; her acceptance of Edgar's proposal will, as Nelly notes, situate her in "a wealthy respectable" position that Heathcliff could not provide (79). For Catherine, however, marrying Heathcliff "would degrade" her because she has already consented to Edgar's proposal, essentially agreeing to the sexual contextualization of their union. Breaking her agreement and choosing Heathcliff would, according to Catherine's reckoning, reposition her as degraded submissive, thereby disrupting their previously scripted parts. Catherine's marriage greatly troubles Heathcliff, who becomes confused in his role. He attempts to usurp Catherine as sadist even as he desires to maintain his role as masochist. During a visit to the married couple, Heathcliff tells Catherine:

"The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him, they crush those beneath them—You are welcome to torture me to death for your amusement, only, allow me to amuse myself a little in the same style—And refrain from insult, as much as you are able. Having levelled my palace, don't erect a hovel and complacently admire your own charity in giving me that for a home. If I imagined you really wished me to marry Isabella, I'd cut my throat!" (112)

Still desiring to play "slave" to Catherine's "tyrant," Heathcliff is jealous and angry that Catherine's sadistic sexual energies are being expended on Edgar, and he therefore determines to take out his aggression on "those beneath" him, leading him to shed his masochistic persona for one that is generally mean-spirited toward any and everyone. The cruelty and violence that Heathcliff displays toward many characters, including Hindley, Hareton, Cathy Linton (the younger), and Lockwood, cannot be considered S/M because the recipients of his abuse are non-consenting participants. They are, in fact, victims of his rage.

A version of consensual non-consent crops up when Edgar's sister, Isabella, elopes with Heathcliff and allows herself to play his submissive for a time. She quickly regrets her decision, though, and attempts to reclaim her sexual identity by composing a textual artifact. In a letter to Nelly (which Lockwood evidently preserves verbatim in his narrative), Isabella characterizes her union as a horrible mistake and her life at *Wuthering Heights* as an insupportable incarceration. Eventually, Isabella



withdraws her consent to be dominated by Heathcliff; she runs from the Heights to her old home, Thrushcross Grange, where Edgar lives in the wake of Catherine's death with their child (Cathy) and Nelly. Isabella explains her revulsion to Nelly:

I've recovered from my first desire to be killed by him. I'd rather he'd kill himself! He has extinguished my love effectually, and so I'm at my ease. I can recollect yet how I loved him; and can dimly imagine that I could still be loving him, if—No, no! Even if he had doted on me, the devilish nature would have revealed its existence, somehow. Catherine had an awfully perverted taste to esteem him so dearly, knowing him so well—Monster! would that he could be blotted out of creation, and out of memory! (174)

Isabella discovers that she is not capable of enjoying an S/M role as Heathcliff's submissive and subjugated wife. Like many of Brontë's early critics, she condemns him as an unnatural monster and admonishes Catherine for loving him. She asserts that she "experienced pleasure in being able to exasperate him: the sense of pleasure woke my instinct of self-preservation; so, I fairly broke free..." (174). Ultimately, Isabella severs her relationship with Heathcliff forever, moving away to have their son, Linton, and dying twelve years afterward.

Many characters in the novel die quite young, and these untimely deaths mark the failure of legitimate S/M interactions between adults. The violent love triangles comprising Edgar, Catherine, Heathcliff, and Isabella are erased as, one by one, the participants die off. In contrast, the second generation—Cathy and Hareton—enacts a functional and consensual S/M relationship. A number of scholars have remarked on this final pairing as evidence of the narrative's rejection of perversity, containment of passion, or domestication of violence. Jill L. Matus, for instance, claims that "[i]n the second generation, Emily Brontë explores a more muted and socially manageable form of relationship, in which the teasing banter of Cathy and Hareton signals the domestication of the Heights" (333). I read this relationship as exemplary of a safe, healthy, nonviolent, successful version of S/M. After an initial period of mutual disdain, Cathy Linton and Hareton Earnshaw develop a relationship characterized by consensuality and deep-seated trust. Visiting the Heights nearly a year after his first exposure to its occupants, Lockwood observes through an open window the young couple playing out an effective S/M scene:

I could both see them and hear them talk before I entered; and, looked and listened in consequence, being moved thereto by a mingled sense of curiosity, and envy that grew as I lingered.

"*Con-trary!*" said a voice, as sweet as a silver bell—"That for the third time, you dunce! I'm not going to tell you again—Recollect, or I pull your hair!"

"Contrary, then," answered another, in deep, but softened tones. "And now, kiss me, for minding so well."

"No, read it over first correctly, without a single mistake."

The male speaker began to read—he was a young man, respectably dressed, and seated at a table, having a book before him. His handsome features glowed with pleasure, and his eyes kept impatiently wandering from the page to a small white hand over his shoulder, which recalled him by a smart slap on the cheek, whenever its owner detected such signs of inattention.

Its owner stood behind; her light shining ringlets blending, at intervals, with his brown locks, as she bent to superintend his studies; and her face—it was lucky he could not see her face, or he would never have been so steady—I could, and I bit my lip, in spite, at having thrown away the chance I might have had, of doing something besides staring at its smiting beauty. (307-08)

Watching Cathy and Hareton play schoolmistress and student, Lockwood experiences a stab of jealousy and laments the fact he did not make an effort to pursue the young woman while he had lived as tenant at Thrushcross Grange.¹⁰ From a position reminiscent of Nelly Dean, who often witnesses scenes from the vantage point of a doorway or window, Lockwood's voyeuristic gaze consumes the couple as they engage in their role play. DeRosa points to this scene as "a parody of episodes that have come before it," but in terms of erotic role play as understood by S/M practitioners, this sexual/textual moment reflects an ideal situation. I wish to recall here the defining features of S/M pain as explained by Moser and Levitt: "The physical pain is caused by behaviours which range from pinches, slaps, and bites to behaviours that may produce lesions or draw blood. The psychological pain encompasses feelings of helplessness, subservience, humiliation, and degradation. The psychological pain is brought about by verbal abuse, bondage, and 'being forced' to do various acts" (322-3). Clearly occupying the sadist's role, Catherine stands domineeringly behind Hareton and "forces" him into submission. Her verbal assault is both psychologically ("...you dunce! I'm not going to tell you again") and physically ("Recollect, or I pull your hair!") threatening, while the "smart slap[s]" serve as punishments to keep Hareton in line. In sharp contrast to many instances of verbal and physical violence in the novel, this exchange is very obviously grounded in mutual consent and pleasure. Recalling the functional S/M play in which Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff engaged as children, these adult participants are comfortable in their S/M roles and trust one another to perform and maintain their parts well. The sexual context of their mutually defined activities may well encompass reproductive intercourse at some future point, leading to offspring.

While a sexual union between Cathy and Hareton might eventually lead to a child, the textual union of Nelly and Lockwood does produce offspring in the form of the narrative itself, dominated, of course, by Nelly. Although Nelly refuses to engage as a masochist with young Catherine Earnshaw, she does take on the role of sadistic storyteller. DeRosa claims that Nelly "is the only major character who is decidedly uninvolved with the sadomasochism that is so rampant in the novel" (38). As I have pointed out, however, Nelly agrees to tell Lockwood the entire painful story of *Wuthering Heights* and its inhabitants—and she experiences sexualized pleasure in rendering him submissive to her tale. Indeed, during his period of convalescence, Lockwood is capable of submission to Nelly: "I am too weak to read, yet I feel



as if I could enjoy something interesting. Why not have up Mrs Dean to finish her tale?" (91). After she concludes, Lockwood quickly regains his health: "Thus ended Mrs Dean's story. Notwithstanding the doctor's prophecy, I am rapidly recovering strength, and, though it be only the second week in January, I propose getting out on horseback, in a day or two, and riding over to *Wuthering Heights*, to inform my landlord that I shall spend the next six months in London..." (298). Incapacitated, submissive, and eager, Lockwood becomes masochistically bound by Nelly and her story. He even takes nourishment from it, and the cathartic release he experiences allows him to prepare for a return to his bustling city life. Psychologist Roy F. Baumeister has shown that certain individuals may be drawn to playing masochistic roles as a means of temporarily escaping the realities and responsibilities of their everyday experiences. He notes that in order to alleviate myriad stresses and anxieties, many successful, powerful men often desire to engage in S/M with a partner who plays the role of sadist (31-6). Having had the opportunity to engage in fantasy and relinquish control to an effective dominatrix, thereby escaping responsibilities for a time, Lockwood is able to return to London. Significantly, when Lockwood comes calling at Thrushcross Grange during his return visit and asks for Nelly, the new housekeeper replies, "MistressDean? Nay!...'shoo doesn't bide here; shoo's up at th' Heights'" (Brontë 306). Nelly, now the most powerful overseer of the estates, begins catching Lockwood up on the most recent events, and once again, he becomes bound by his mistress. Her words are both the bondage straps that confine him and the whips that inflict pleasurable pain upon him.

Subspace: Un/Writing/De/Composing Sexuality/Textuality

In the final chapter of *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood conveys the manner in which Heathcliff met his demise. Nelly tells Lockwood that, during the last days of his life, Master Heathcliff had behaved even more oddly than usual, displaying an "unnatural—it was unnatural—appearance of joy under his black brows" (328). The following day, Nelly narrates, she had observed Heathcliff, alone but "gaz[ing] at something within two yards distance. And, whatever it was, it communicated, apparently, both pleasure and pain, in exquisite extremes, at least, the anguished, yet raptured expression of his countenance suggested that idea" (331). Two days after witnessing this distinctly S/M tableau, Nelly discovered Heathcliff in Catherine Earnshaw's old bed, "laid on his back...dead and stark" (335). After Nelly concludes her discourse, Lockwood finds Heathcliff's final resting place, and the novel closes with his words:

I sought, and soon discovered, the three head-stones on the slope next the moor—the middle one, grey, and half buried in heath—Edgar Linton's only harmonized by the turf, and moss creeping up its foot—Heathcliff's still bare.

I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath, and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth. (337)

In death, Edgar, Catherine, and Heathcliff sleep peacefully together, constituting a silent, harmonious "family" that contrasts sharply with their noisy, unhappy *ménage à trois* in life. Death brings them together and, although their grave markers are in various states of decay, as are their corpses, we are left with the certainty that, in time, nature will further unite stones and bodies. The process of decomposition will eternalize their union; it will erase the distinguishing names on their headstones, along with the individual bodies laid beneath those stones. Thus, time, in a macrocosmic version of the Freudian death drive, unwrites—decomposes—the textual and sexual compositions of bodies, whether those bodies had been of stone or of flesh.¹¹ Death silences and erases textual and sexual expression.

If death unwrites bodies, then life writes—and perhaps rewrites—them. Nelly Dean's storytelling and Lockwood's subsequent preservation/transcription of events in a textual artifact enact the composition—the scripting—of sexual bodies. Buried in the narrative framework of Lockwood's journal are the powerful discursive productions of several female characters (Nelly's tale, Catherine's marginalia in books, Isabella's letter), thus establishing several layers of S/M textual/sexual intercourse.¹² Readers encounter all of the characters—their thoughts, words, actions, desires, bodies—through the übernarration of Lockwood, who seems at last to take on the sadist's role, binding the other participants in his own fantasy, and dominating them physically and psychologically by writing their lives. However, Lockwood is hardly master here; rather, Brontë herself is the ultimate source of sadistic storytelling and, as a result, readers participate as voyeurs eagerly consuming the scenes that she has scripted for her—literally—bound submissives (her characters). Just as Lockwood becomes the enthralled, if sole, audience member of Nelly's stories, so too do readers become the rapt audience of Brontë's novel. Baumeister points out that practitioners of S/M frequently desire spectators to witness their play, as having an audience present can bolster the pleasure and sexual excitement experienced by both sadist and masochist (42-6). Laura Hinton has claimed that *Wuthering Heights* "refuses visual pleasure, and the sadomasochistic perversions of voyeurism and fetishism" (148). As I have shown, however, a number of voyeuristic characters observe S/M scenes, including Nelly and Lockwood. As "spectators," readers also legitimise the S/M elements of the novel.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, Brontë beckons readers to participate in that S/M play. The act of reading creates the potential for consensual participation in textual and sexual relationship with the author. Like Lockwood, readers become bound and docile in the throes of the painful but pleasurable story; indeed, through Lockwood we are *locked* in a consensual S/M relationship. Also like Lockwood, we feel compelled to reproduce the text, merging it with our own, preserving and replicating the perversity of its characters, the textually mediated sexualities that burst the boundaries of polite nineteenth-century society. Approaching the novel in terms of S/M practice as understood by its adherents creates a space in which traditional views of Emily Brontë can be overturned. Considered by many contemporaries and later scholars as an isolated, more or less asexual young spinster—Charlotte Brontë, for instance, described Emily as "not naturally gregarious, circumstances favoured



and fostered her tendency to seclusion" (li)—my reading nevertheless suggests that Brontë possessed an acute awareness of power dynamics and appreciated the sexually charged possibilities encompassed by both text and pain. She recognized gradations of violence, perceived nuances in consensuality, and modeled female autonomy over textuality and sexuality. Indeed, Brontë continues to assert her own control, as I feel obligated to perform the task of scripting her textualized sexuality, of maintaining her perverse passion and power. At the beginning of this essay, I implied that scholars might take on the sadist's role and playfully beat texts into submission. The reality is Brontë, refusing to leave off her whip, has made me her bitch.

Notes

1. Freud, *Three Essays* 69-70.

2. Foucault 47.

3. Moser and Kleinplatz 3.

4. Harold Bloom notes this is an anti-feminist comment, given that "Mrs. Brownrigg was a notorious eighteenth-century sadistic and murderous midwife" (24). Brownrigg was hanged for killing a domestic servant, a child who finally succumbed to extreme abuse. Mrs. Browning refers to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a successful Victorian poet whose work often urged social reform. Rossetti and Browning knew each other and, although Rossetti enjoyed her later work, the 1854 letter seems to frown on some of her ideas, probably her heavy-handed condemnation of child labour in "The Cry of the Children" (1842, 1844). Rossetti's comment links Brontë and her novel with women at both ends of a spectrum of violent excess: Brownrigg who factually killed a young servant and Browning who "fictionally" assaults readers with sentimental verse detailing the untimely and horrifying deaths of child workers.

5. DeRosa claims, for instance, "[a]s Heathcliff's distance from language parallels his increasing masochism with Catherine, Catherine's relationship to books and reading reflects her own involvement in S/M" as a sadist (30). She also points to the narrator, Lockwood, as a sadist, asserting that his "sadism...is a desperate attempt to separate himself from the discursivity that has created and that maintains him. In some ways, Lockwood is not so far from Heathcliff and Catherine. He struggles, as they do, with his place in a society of symbols, with his place in the story he himself can't help telling" (37).

6. Readers will recall that Brontë structures her novel within a narrative framing device consisting of Lockwood's arrival in the Northern moors of England in the winter of 1801 and his return visit a year later, events that Lockwood describes in his journal. Most of the plot is conveyed by Nelly Dean, though Lockwood claims to preserve "her own words, only a little condensed. She is, on the whole, a very fair narrator and I don't think I could improve her style" (Brontë 157).



7. To dispel claims of anachronism, I wish to point out that the *OED Online*'s first recorded use of "come" as a slang term meaning "to experience sexual orgasm" is 1650. See def. 17.
8. *Ibid.*, def. 4a.
9. *Ibid.*, defs. 2d and 2a, respectively.
10. In the study conducted by Moser and Levitt, 32.2% of respondents had engaged in "Teacher/student" role playing. The most popular role play (68.3% of respondents) was a mentally stimulating version of "Master/slave," and the second most popular (60.5%) was a physically stimulating version of the same. See Moser and Levitt 330.
11. For more on the death drive, see Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.
12. Scholars have discussed the sexual/textual nature of other nineteenth-century works featuring multiple narrators. See the essays in Davis, for example, particularly Joseph, who asserts the epistles comprising *Frankenstein* function as vaginal folds through which readers penetrate.

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KARA M. MANNING is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Southern Mississippi and is currently drafting her dissertation, "Moving Words/Motion Pictures: Proto-Cinematic Narrative in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction," which examines the intersections between Victorian visual technologies and literature. Her essay "'That's the Effect of Living Backwards': Technological Change, Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books, and Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*" appears in the Winter 2011 issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, and a piece on Tim Burton's use of stop-motion animation has been accepted for inclusion in a planned collection on the director.